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ABSTRACT

This paper provides background information about the Project Hahn adventure-based program and its ongoing involvement with the Port Arthur Recovery Group to assist 42 adolescents directly affected by the murders of 36 people by a lone gunman in Tasmania in 1996. Case studies relate personal, social, and community issues faced by these adolescents, as well as post-course challenges as they attempted to implement personal changes within their community. The philosophy and practices of the Project Hahn therapy program are given: work with at-risk and socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, pre-course agreement among all participants, promotion of positive peer dynamics, instructional use of risk-recreation activities, freedom of task choice, peer and leader support, followup with participants, and cultivation of moral growth through small-group peer interaction. One case study documents how participation by a 15-year-old student in adventure activities helped her to reevaluate her experiences with the Port Arthur shooting and redefine personal issues of trust, vulnerability, and protective and defensive behaviors. Project Hahn will use planned intervention throughout each wilderness challenge course to experiment with a range of new ideas and behaviors; confront salient and pressing issues; and provide time and opportunity within a supportive and safe environment for adolescents identified by the Port Arthur Recovery Group to express fears, pain, and the traumatic impact of the shooting tragedy. (SAS)

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The Aftermath of the Port Arthur Incident: The Response by Project Hahn to Adolescent Needs

By Allan Adams, Robert L. Sveen, M.Ed. & Carey J. Denholm, Ph, D.

Background

The afternoon of April 28th, 1996 is often referred too as the day the island State of Tasmania forever lost its innocence. The murders of 36 individuals by a lone gunman reluctantly thrust Tasmania into the national and international spotlight on an unprecedented scale. One year later many repercussions in relation to national gun controls, community recovery plans and on-going counselling and medical care are still being acknowledged and addressed. On a local level, dissension over the right to publish books about the gunman and the suitability of the planned Port Arthur memorial centre continues. In light of the immensity of this event, many of these seeming peripheral issues may appear to lack relevance as compared to the human costs experienced by many residents of the Tasman Peninsula. Nevertheless, the somewhat tortuous and contentious resolution of each subsequent event can been seen as symptomatic of the many ripple effects within the community. One year later all Tasmanians continue to witness both subtle and overt reminders of this massacre.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss background details about the Project Hahn adventure-based program and to relate the sequence of events leading to the involvement of the organisation with the Port Arthur Recovery Group and the 42 nominated adolescents living in the Port Arthur area. As the response by Project Hahn has only recently commenced, involvement has been limited to the experiences of the first four adolescents from the Tasman peninsula. By way of a case study, discussion will include comments and observations from one of these participants. Experiences from her "journey" will be used to commence a profile of the ways in which this program is being used to assist adolescents directly affected by this tragedy to deal with personal, social and community issues. Discussion of post-course challenges faced by adolescents as they attempt to implement personal changes within their community will be included.

RC 021719

Project Hahn: Theoretical Approach and Philosophy

Philosophically, the Project Hahn program nestles itself within the framework of a social justice strategy. Wilderness-based adventure therapy courses consist of mixed gender groups with participants who represent a cross-section of Tasmanian youth and come from all geographical parts of Tasmania. Individuals access the program through referrals from Commonwealth employment agencies, community or custodial corrections, public and private schools, youth accommodation, disability, drug and alcohol services, or from self-enlistment.

Since its inception in 1983, 1400 adolescents have attended the program. Although open to the entire adolescent community, half of the participants (700) have been disadvantaged adolescent males and females. Gender balance is attempted, despite often the initial unwillingness of females to view the course as beneficial. Potential applicants are all young people, and include those who are disadvantaged as a result of socio-economic conditions in which they live or because they have been through a specific negative period in their lives.

Single individuals from a variety of backgrounds are targeted for each Project Hahn course and pre-existing peer groups are discouraged. Each participant therefore commences the course on an "even standing" with other members. Thus, without fear of judgement from peers, the opportunity is available to the individual to experiment with a range of new ideas and behaviours. Once committed, an agreement confirms all parties' roles with the aim of reinforcing the personal development aspects of the program and incorporating the follow-up component upon their return to the community.

The promotion of positive peer dynamics is a goal of each Project Hahn program through the use of normative group development processes. To complement the social function of group development, each course also sets out to reverse participants' self-defeating internal dialogue through a progressively continuous process of task mastery. Essential to this program are the learning and successful achievement of goals and the agreement with others upon general social values. It has been our experience that this process strengthens the individuals' social repertoire of coping mechanisms to defend against peer pressure; aimed at assisting the return to their social situation (Sveen, 1994).

The instructional use of risk-recreation activities (e.g. rockclimbing, caving, kayaking, abseiling) as a behavioural learning tool, focuses participants on the immediate situation at hand with decisional consequences impacting on a personal level. This approach intends that short-term future behaviours can then be influenced through the continued reinforcement of personal decisions which reap success and the subsequent extinguishing of behaviours from decisions that potentially cause discomfort (Sveen & Denholm, 1993).

One of the essential tenets within this program is that existential understanding develops through freedom of task choice, peer and leader support and challenges which extend participants to their perceived personal limit. Post activity time alone in the evenings is encouraged as a method of further self-discovery (Sveen, 1993).

Staff at Project Hahn learn much about participants prior to and during each course and the organisation operates follow-up programmes for all participants. If personal issues have not been dealt within the standard course then it is often likely they will surface later. Follow-up courses vary in location and duration and are designed to be demanding on a physical and psychological level. The second contact with the programme is designed for individuals who are serious about working on positive change

and are eager to communicate their feelings and sense an urgency to continue with their personal goals.

Finally, moral growth is cultivated within this program through small group peer interaction as well as discussion of safety and well-being issues necessary for the comfort of each member. This aspect involves co-operative living through the discussion of meaningful issues, which indicate how personal behaviours impact on the remainder of the group. Any subsequent personal shift or resolution to support a moral stance necessary for group maintenance and support is encouraged and recognised.

It is the intention of the Project Hahn staff to allow participants the freedom to react and challenge in any way they feel is appropriate and responsible during a wilderness experience. Thus, it is believed that on-going positive future behaviour has more likelihood of success through heuristic learning than if subtle advice is offered. Such increases in participants' behavioural and social repertoires is considered an holistic issue of program efficacy (Sveen & Denholm, in press).

The Response to the Port Arthur Incident

In July 1996 Project Hahn made initial contact with the Port Arthur Recovery group, established to support the Tasman Peninsula community in the aftermath of the tragedy. Considerable interest was expressed in terms of what Project Hahn might be able to provide for adolescents affected and living in the immediate vicinity. The only school serving the Tasman Peninsula including Port Arthur, Tasman District High School, became the community-based referral agent and several teachers and the school psychologist provided assistance.

The proposal offered to the community was to invite participants to attend Project Hahn, regularly scheduled throughout the year. As a result of several visits, key contacts and a guarantee of placements on future courses were established. The first available openings occurred in September and November 1996 and were accepted by the first four of the 42 identified adolescents in the area who were exhibiting signs of distress or other problem behaviour. The following brief case study demonstrates how Project Hahn was able to accommodate this one adolescent and respond to her most pressing concerns.

Case Study: Jacklyn*

Jacklyn is a 15 year old student who attended a five-day day Project Hahn course held on the Tasman Peninsula (10km from Port Arthur), a venue offering opportunities for abseiling, kayaking and multi-day walking. Jacklyn made the following comments during her pre course interview.

(Personal objectives) "I want to meet new people ,I'm fed up with the boring old set)." (Interests) "All kinds of sports, in particular, running,swimming and my main passion of surfing." (Like to change) "Develop alternatives to arguing with my mother and sister."

During the first day Jacklyn found the canoeing particularly trying. She and another participant shared a double kayak and soon discovered steering in a straight line was rather difficult. They were unable to co-ordinate their paddle strokes in the gusting wind. Consequently they wasted valuable energy and while pausing to gain some respite for their tired arms the wind swept them back along the bay from where they had struggled

hard to come. Jacklyn was very frustrated with herself and her partner as their skill level was not evenly matched and it appeared she was doing the majority of the work. With support from the remainder of the group they eventually made it to the other end of the beach, where she swapped partners and paddled with someone with whom she was more evenly matched.

During the evening discussion on Monday night, Jacklyn set several personal goals:

- Complete a forward abseil
- Learn to push past the fear when faced with a serious challenge
- To stop putting herself down
- Stop being domineering within group situations

It was during this discussion that she revealed that her absence from home on the day of the massacre (she was 120 km away visiting in Hobart) gave her the feeling she had let her family down. As the news filtered through via the media to Hobart she recalled that her concern for her family grew. All phone lines had been "jammed" and for most of the evening there was no news regarding her twin sister. Later that evening she experienced severe anxiety. It was not until much later that she was able to ascertain that her family was safe. She indicated during the discussion that since the day of the massacre her level of concern for her family grew whenever she was away from home. Her understanding was that she became worried in case something like that happened again.

Jacklyn had abseiled once before and on the following day displayed a positive outlook prior to the session. A variety of abseils were rigged up, graduated accordingly to ensure a successful outcome for each participant. After completing the first two successfully, Jacklyn hung back during the final 15m abseil. She was the last participant and expressed concern over her ability and was quite nervous about leaning out over the edge. While leaning at maximum angle and poised ready to descend past the lip, the instructor asked her to close her eyes and describe what she visualised. She imagined the group and her family encouraging her to go down the cliff. She achieved the remainder of the abseil with ease and stated later that she felt compelled to complete it because she didn't want to let the group down.

The next evening the group prepared for the bush walk and departed for a campsite about 90 minutes down the Cape Pillar track. At this stage of the course the group assumes the leadership responsibility and instructor intervention from then on is limited to duty of care issues. During the walk that evening the group split up along the track, despite agreeing to stick together. When the remainder of the group caught up with two male participants in the lead, Jacklyn gave them some feedback on staying together. Whereas it was presented in an open manner, her response was met with considerable defensiveness and opposition.

Jacklyn took over leading the group from this point and regularly received negative comments over the pace she was setting. The remainder of the group supported her during this tirade of abuse from the original leaders while the instructors endeavoured to get to the core of the issue. The crux of the issue was centred on the change in leadership, which the original leaders were reluctant to let go of. This demonstrated to Jacklyn and the other participants the inherent strength that lies within a group that is willing to stand its ground. In forcing these individuals to conform to the will of the rest of the group, they discovered a new strategy on how to deal with adversity. The angry reaction then became a conscious acknowledgment by the original leaders of their powerlessness to manipulate the group.

The discussion after dinner centred on the issue of leadership, with blame being levelled and Jacklyn taking a lead role in directing much of this discussion. During the next evening discussion, the group were asked about progress towards their goals and were invited to give each other feedback. Jacklyn received feedback about her goal of non-domineering. The group did not think of her as domineering during group discussions, rather they valued her honest manner and her ability to listen to all the views presented and sum up the situation.

A later logbook entry included the following: "I'm quite excited about going home tomorrow. I'm looking forward to: 1. My surfboard; 2. Hot bath /real toilet; 3. Everything that isn't here; 4. I'm also looking forward to the walk back."

On the final day the group assisted with packing the trailer and then drove to the beach for a final de-brief. The instructors asked each participant the following "miracle" question: "One night while you were fast asleep, a miracle happened and your problem was solved. How do you know it was solved and what would be different?" Jacklyn's reply was, The massacre at Port Arthur wouldn't have happened and nobody would have been killed and the difference is we wouldn't have to hate Martin Bryant.

Issues identified with Jacklyn that she needs to continue to work on included:

- Not putting herself down and developing her positive self talk
- Giving herself positive reinforcement
- Setting realistic goals and learning to re-evaluate completed goals
- Fostering her leadership potential and developing less authoritative styles
- Accepting mistakes as part of learning

During the week following the course Jacklyn returned to school. She delivered a fifteen-minute speech to the 300 students at the school assembly outlining her experiences. In her role as activity organiser at the local youth centre, Jacklyn now has the opportunity support the remainder of the identified youth from a participant's perspective of the Project Hahn program.

Four weeks after the course Jacklyn reported the following:

Main emphasis of the week:

The discovery of how different we all were, learning to understand each other's ways and finding that getting along together was a lot of hard work.

Key thought about the course:

I mostly think about how easy it was to talk about the way we felt.

Post course conversations:

I found talking about stuff helped during the course, but it doesn't help at home with my mum and sister. I've tried talking with my sister but it doesn't work, we just have the same old arguments. I could really use someone to talk about my feelings.... I can't talk about intimate things with my friends at school because I am frightened of people blabbing and I can't trust them. I miss it heaps talking to people.

Personal learning:

Just how much I missed my mum and the family. I really missed the comfort that comes from familiarity and knowing what is going to happen next.

Reacting to new situations and facing fears:

When I don't know what is happening next I become scared, nervous and tend to close up, but I really like being stimulated by new things...I think about it first and what's going to happen. I face my fears as soon as I can because I know I have to eventually face them in the long run.

Reflection on personal changes:
I wanted something to change. I wanted to learn to get on with my family but it hasn't happened.
The miracle question:
I would have sorted out things with my boyfriend and we wouldn't have had to split up. Secondly, that the positive things that are happening now in our community would have happened without the massacre at Port Arthur.

Jacklyn returned to attend a follow-up course in caving in April 1997. This gave her a chance to meet an entirely new group, which afforded a neutral and supportive environment. She reported that as this final course occurred some 300 km from her home, in light of her previous traumatic experiences with separation, this was the first time since the event that she had been able to cope in being such a distance from her family.

Conclusion

Four weeks after the follow up course it was evident that Jacklyn was able to reflect on personal issues with clarity and depth. She reported the development and maintenance of more positive self-talk and a more realistic appraisal of fears of new situations particularly when confronted by physical challenges. However, Jacklyn was disheartened at her inability to resolve conflict with her family and a major difficulty continues to be the absence of a trusting and confidential friend.

Adolescents are often considered to be the "social barometer" of any community. Given the traumatic event and its impact upon the entire community it is not surprising that issues of trust, vulnerability and protective and defensive behaviours continue to be mirrored and surface amongst adolescents. As one of Jacklyn's teacher's commented: The issues that present themselves are varied. One trend is the desire for the community to put the event behind them and get on with the healing process. As a result the first anniversary of the Port Arthur incident that is planned for April, is to be very low key.

Prior to the massacre, youth living in the Port Arthur experienced low levels of activity, boredom, and attendance at the local youth centre had been sporadic. Since the incident interest has grown with seven assistants and leaders now organising video and regular game evenings for 25 young people. In addition, the influx of counselling professionals has provided impetus for individuals to have the courage and legitimacy to seek support and the opportunity to acknowledge specific and existing problems within families and in the community at large.

As reported, of the 42 adolescents identified by the Port Arthur Recovery Group only four have attended a Project Hahn course. Due to the urgency of the needs of these particular youth, the principle of heterogeneity to include pre-existing peer groups may need to be relaxed. Selected and mature youth may be brought from elsewhere in Tasmania to join with four or five individuals identified by the Port Arthur Recovery group.

For the adolescents directly affected by the events of April 28th, 1996, Project Hahn has been entrusted to provide much more than a wilderness challenge experience. Experimenting with a range of new ideas and behaviours, confronting salient and pressing issues and providing time and the opportunity within a supportive and safe environment to express fears, pain and the traumatic impact of this event, become aspects needing planned intervention throughout each wilderness challenge course.

* Participant's name has been altered

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